



## **The Homeland Security Department's Plan to Consolidate and Co-locate Regional and Field Offices: Improving Communication and Coordination**

**Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2247  
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**Statement of James Lee Witt, President, James Lee Witt Associates and former Director of the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency**

Chairman Ose, Chairman Shays and members of the Committees, thank you for inviting me to participate in this hearing today.

By holding this hearing the Committee is providing a valuable service for the Department of Homeland Security. Our being called here today is providing an excellent forum for discussion with DHS's state and local customers regarding their needs for a coherent interface with DHS so that they may accomplish their mission. I feel strongly that state and local governments and first responders need to have input into formation of all of DHS's plan – and especially in the discussion of regional and field offices. Ensuring that their needs are being met as end-users of DHS services, recipients of grant funding, and partners in training and preparedness is especially critical to the success of DHS and public safety throughout our Nation.

It is also very important to hear from people on the front lines like Secretary Flynn from Massachusetts as well as the experts from NAPA, represented today by Mr. Kinghorn, whose continuous study of best practices gives them a unique perspective on what truly makes government work. Today's testimony will no doubt provide the insights and perspective that the Department can use to improve communication and coordination through consolidation and co-location of certain DHS offices.

I ask that as you look at the consolidation of offices or other areas of concern at DHS, you analyze them for their effect on the local/state/federal partnership that was in place just a short time ago.

### **The State of our Emergency Management System**

As you and your colleagues continue to examine DHS and its growth, I want you to know that I and many others in the emergency management community across the country are very concerned about the direction FEMA is headed.

First, we are greatly concerned that the successful partnership that was built between local/state/federal partners and their ability to communicate, coordinate, train, prepare, and respond has been sharply eroded.

Second, FEMA, having lost its status as an independent agency, is being buried beneath a massive bureaucracy whose main and only focus is fighting terrorism while an all-hazards mission is getting lost in the shuffle.

Third, the FEMA Director has lost Cabinet status and along with it the close relationship to the President and Cabinet Affairs. I believe we could not have been as responsive as we were during my time at FEMA had there had been several levels of Federal bureaucracy between myself and the White House. I am afraid communities across the country are starting to suffer the impact of having FEMA buried within a bureaucracy rather than functioning as a small but agile independent agency that coordinates Federal response effectively and efficiently after a disaster.

### **Learning from the Past**

FEMA was assembled in 1979 in much the same way that the various agencies of DHS have been put together. Although the reorganization that brought the various agencies together under FEMA was on a much smaller and more manageable scale, it took our country close to 15 years to get it right.

When FEMA was formed there were several cultures all being thrown together under one new roof. The dominant “top down” culture within early FEMA traced its roots to the days of civil defense. This culture was probably necessary for those types of national security oriented activities. As a State Director of Emergency Management, I was often on the receiving end of FEMA’s “top down”, rigid, and sometimes inflexible approach. It is for this reason that I was determined, as FEMA Director, to take the Agency in a new direction. I wanted to move towards becoming an organization where the needs of the stakeholders and employees were valued and heeded.

DHS is struggling with growing pains similar to what FEMA struggled with for the first 15 years of its existence. However, I continue to be concerned about the scope of the task that has been given to Under Secretary Hutchinson and Secretary Ridge. FEMA was an agency of 2,600 permanent employees and 4,000 disaster reservists and it took 15 years to get on the right track. The reorganization taking place with DHS is several scales above the FEMA reorganization and they are being asked to accomplish this massive effort in a world full of uncertainty regarding future terrorist activity and the certainty of future natural disasters.

As you may know, I was not in favor of creating such a large Department all at once. I supported the creation of a Department of Homeland Security, but I do not think this was accomplished in the right way. I always thought we should start with the areas that needed the greatest and most immediate attention – specifically those activities involving the gathering, assimilation, and dissemination of terrorist intelligence to state and local officials. Also, I thought it made sense to engage in efforts to improve the security of our most vulnerable critical infrastructure and targeted industries. I felt that many of the pieces in

place to manage the consequences of a disaster or terrorist attack were not broken and didn't need "fixing". I saw no need to reinvent the wheel on the consequence management side of emergency management – particularly when there were several other more pressing areas that needed to be addressed regarding counter-terrorism efforts.

In an effort to build other Directorates within DHS that need more help, vital pieces of the Emergency Preparedness and Response Directorate – FEMA – are being moved or underfunded to prop up these other very critical areas. Programs like the very successful Fire Grants are being moved out of FEMA and the Emergency Management Performance Grants (EMPG) which provide the backbone to our emergency management systems are being cut and significantly restructured in a very detrimental way. In fact some estimates suggest that the 25-percent cap on personnel costs within the EMPG could result in more than half of the country's 4,000-plus emergency managers losing their jobs.

By throwing all of these disparate pieces together in the DHS stew, we have not only diluted the concentration on some of the most critical parts of our counter-terrorism efforts, but we are allowing scarce resources to be directed away from consequence management. Our Nation's emergency management system has often been held up as an international model; however, this country's well-oiled emergency management infrastructure - that has been built over many years - is now in great jeopardy as DHS attempts to build capabilities in other areas of the Department.

I say this not to fuel any rivalry between the DHS directorates – all of their functions are important – they simply should not have to all compete for scarce resources allocated to them within the DHS budget.

### **The Importance of the Regional Presence for Emergency Management**

I appreciate the opportunity to express my views as you look at the important issues of regions and office consolidation. As you probably know, FEMA has 10 Regional Offices, a Pacific Area Office in Hawaii, the Caribbean Area Office in Puerto Rico, and temporary Disaster Field Offices (DFO) established when disasters are declared. The staff and resources in these offices enabled our agency to maintain strong relationships with our state and local partners and the other FRP agencies in these Federal cities. These relationships were critical for effective communication and coordination before, during, and after a disaster event. The relationships built over the years facilitated our ability to pre-position staff and resources in advance of hurricane or flood disasters and helped expedite efforts in catastrophic disasters like the Northridge Earthquake.

Through on-going training and exercise and the administration of our Performance Partnership Agreements with the states in their area, our regional staff were able to truly know the state and local capabilities – both strengths and weakness – so that our FEMA team could hit the ground running during a disaster. The relationships that were built over the years - during disaster and non-disaster experiences - allowed the Regions, and the entire Agency, to accurately identify the needs of the states and local governments, first responders, and disaster victims.

Therefore, I feel strongly that it should be required that Federal agencies and departments listen to the needs of their state and local partners, first responders, and disasters victims when setting priorities. It is only after an organization has truly listened to these constituencies that it is then able to strategically align resources in a way that will give the best chance for accomplishing the mission and meeting the identified needs. The primary avenue for FEMA's service delivery, information gathering, and quality control is through the Regional and Field offices. It was the regional offices' relationships with our customers that allowed us to get the job done and I would be very concerned about the effectiveness and responsiveness of FEMA if the regional presence were significantly reduced. As it regards co-location and consolidation, I would support any efforts that can reduce cost or provide better customer service to state and local leaders and disaster victims.

### **Looking Toward the Future**

What gives me hope about the future is that this committee and other like-minded leaders in Congress are trying to help DHS to sort through the myriad of issues on their plate, to connect with their customers in state and local government, and to align themselves with a Regional and Field Office structure that serves their customers well and allows them to efficiently achieve the important goal of a safer homeland.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you and I would be glad to answer any questions that you may have for me.